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ABSTRACT

The role of assistant principal has changed very little over the past 50 years. Now this traditional role must be reconceived as a position parallel to that of the principal, but with responsibilities in specialized areas. The new position should include decision-making authority and should possibly require certification from the state. Studies on secondary and elementary assistant principals, while few, suggest that both groups are interested in greater involvement with supervision and curriculum development rather than maintenance functions. Many assistants see their position as a stepping stone to the principalship; few see it as a career choice. The current phenomenon of declining enrollments restricts opportunities for advancement. Thus, it is critical to find ways of making the assistant principalship more attractive as a career choice. One solution would have the principal cope with extant problems while the assistant principal is given the legal responsibility to administer new functions. A role in participative decision making would also contribute to job satisfaction. New studies of assistant principals at the national level are needed in order to identify their current status, which is necessary to the charting of their future participation in the leadership and administration of schools. (Author/WD)

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THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

AS DECISION MAKER

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The assistant principalship or vice principalship is an active and important role in schools, but for too long a time the position has been relegated to the status of a curiosity in the study of educational administration. The time has arrived when the traditional role of assistant principal must be reconceived as a position parallel to that of the principal but with responsibilities in specialized areas for the schools of the 1980s. The role should facilitate the recognition of changing values of society as reflected in new and required school programs, declining pupil enrollment, reduced financial support and increased community influence. The new position should carry with it the power of decision making in the form of authority from the school board and possibly certification from the state which reflects specialized university training. This paper will consider the assistant principal in elementary and in secondary school from two vantage points: (1) traditional duties and responsibilities and (2) role as decision maker.

In 1969 there were 4300 elementary assistant principals in school districts of 3000 or more population and an unknown number of secondary school assistant principals.¹ Although this number probably has declined since then, the balance represents a substantial number of administrators in schools.

National studies were first performed about elementary and secondary assistant principals in 1969 and in 1970; none have been reported since. Before that time, studies were limited to state-wide samples and those studies began in 1926. The few studies reported can be used to suggest trends in the development of the position but comprehensive national studies are needed to accurately describe the situation as it exists today.

Duties and Responsibilities - Secondary School Assistant Principal

An early study of secondary school assistant principals completed in 1926 involving 52 Ohio communities reported their main responsibilities concerned clerical duties and supervision of extra-curricular activities.² By 1946, studies performed in Wisconsin and in Minneapolis reported increased responsibilities. Most of assistant principal's time was accounted for by pupil accounting (attendance), curriculum (scheduling), school control (discipline), public relations (meeting with parents) and improving instruction (visiting new and problem teachers).³

A study performed in New York State in 1957 reported changing responsibilities. Supervisory assistant principals listed their duties in order of importance: principal in absentia; teacher complaints; discipline; school control (scheduling); mechanical procedures for operating the school.⁴ Although this sample taken in an Eastern state may not be representative of the U.S., it identifies for the first time an involvement of assistant principals with teachers, albeit dealing with their complaints.

When these same assistant principals were asked to list the duties they considered important, the order and content was somewhat changed. They reported: principal in absentia; analyze curricular needs; pupil discipline; teacher complaints/staff meetings with teachers; teacher-pupil relations. Here clearly, an interest is expressed in activities different than those assigned including an emphasis on curriculum and relations with teachers other than receiving complaints.

By 1973 secondary assistant principals saw further changes in their roles. Reported in order to importance were: (1) discipline; (2) teacher evaluation; (3) attendance; (4) curriculum development and staff leadership; (5) student activities; (6) community relations.⁵ Items 2, 4, and 6 move this role closer

to that of the principal and away from the maintenance function described over the preceeding 50 years.

Duties and Responsibilities

Elementary School Assistant Principals

Unlike the studies of assistant principals in secondary schools, there have been fewer studies reported of elementary school assistant principals. The first "study" of the role occurred in 1925 when an attempt was made to determine their status. Among the tentative conclusions were: (1) functions of assistant principals varied widely among the school systems and (2) in most systems the assistant principal was primarily an assistant to the principal. The author suggested the need of a clerk for routine work if the position of assistant principal was to become "truly professional" and the duties were to "dignify the office."⁶

Perhaps one reason so little has been reported about elementary school assistant principals is that there are so few of them and most of those are located in large school districts. In 1948, 16 percent of principals in a study reported one full-time assistant. The number declined in 1958 to 7 percent and increased slightly to 8.4 percent in 1968. Furthermore of those principals reporting one full-time assistant, 24 percent were in districts with enrollments over 25,000, 6 percent in 3000 pupil districts and 2 percent in over 300 pupil centers.⁷

The first national study was performed in 1969.⁸ In this study current responsibilities of assistant principals were listed in order of their commitment: (1) pupil personnel (64 percent); (2) supervision (24 percent); (3) curriculum (7 percent); (4) public relations (2 percent). The preference for commitment was somewhat different: (1) supervision (49 percent); (2) curriculum

development (25 percent); (3) pupil personnel (18 percent); (4) public relations (2 percent). The interest in greater involvement with supervision and curriculum development rather than maintenance functions parallels that of secondary school assistant principals. Both groups prefer functions similar to those of the principal.

Perhaps the duties and functions of assistant principals in both elementary and secondary schools bear some relationship to the fact that many assistants see the position as a stepping stone to the principalship while few see it as a career choice.⁹ A new reality not accounted for by any of the studies cited concerns declining enrollments and its effect on reducing the availability of principalships. Obviously in such a period assistant principals realize that shrinking possibilities of jobs must affect opportunities for advancement. With that access reduced there must be ways of making the assistant principalship a position which will be seen more as a career choice and less as a stepping stone.

There are some ways of professionalizing the assistant principal role.¹⁰ These include: (1) clear role definition; (2) recognition as a member of the administrative team with certain skills; (3) specific preparation for the job; (4) leadership abilities will increase professional recognition; (5) promote education through involvement in community affairs; (6) develop area of expertise. Each way will be discussed briefly in turn.

Role Definition

In schools with an assistant principal it is usually clear to those within the school what the job entails. Once outside the building the job is less clear. It is necessary that all persons having contact with a school know clearly the job of their assistant principal. Should the duties be redefined, new descriptions should be forthcoming. In elementary schools, 53 percent of assistant principals reported that decisions determining their duties were made

by negotiation with their principal. Another 28 percent indicated day-to-day events determined their job, while 19 percent have written descriptions in a handbook.¹¹ It is clear that assistant principals generally (72 percent) know what their jobs are to be; this information should be shared with a wide audience. As their role changes, becomes more specialized and acquires authority, this information must be shared with significant others.

Skilled Team Member

Too often the assistant principal has specific duties but the principal makes final decisions. As all authority comes from the school board, the board and the principal should recognize the assistant principal as a member of the administration with decision making authority in identified areas. This could come about with increased recognition that those filling the role have training and skills appropriate to the responsibility and should have commensurate authority.

Job Preparation

Preparation for the assistant principalship remains essentially the same as that of the principal; there is little or no distinction in graduate programs and certainly no state certificates specifying separate preparation. Most assistant principals learn their particular job through an apprenticeship. It isn't called that but "learning-by-doing" is an apprenticeship.

It may be appropriate to take either of several actions to truly legitimize preparation for the position. States could consider establishing an assistant principal certificate not unlike an administrative endorsement. Such a certificate would identify appropriate courses and an internship or a period of apprenticeship. The certificate might carry enough status to establish the assistant principalship as a career rather than as a stepping stone. In addition,

graduate programs in universities could recognize the role as a legitimate major area of preparation.

Leadership and Recognition

As several of the above suggestions are implemented the leadership position of the assistant principal role will be established. Along with official recognition, school staff and the public will accord the job the status it deserves. Like the evolution of the principalship this new position will take time to garner respectability. The process will proceed faster if those persons currently filling the role demonstrate leadership ability so that professional recognition will come as a natural consequence.

Education in Community Affairs

Several of the studies reported community relations as a low priority in practice or in preference. In according the position higher status, public visibility would have to increase. Current visibility as the enforcer of discipline would give way to meetings with parent groups, presentations to the school board and other activities parallel to those performed by the principal. A concern with particular educational programs and their impact on the community would be an appropriate focus.

Area of Expertise

The assistant principal must develop areas of special knowledge which will increase his usefulness, his responsibility and his authority. Some necessary areas are already in the schools; others will be developing.

One of the realities of life in American education is a decreasing number of school-age children resulting in a decline in the number of schools needed to educate them. A corollary of this decline is an increase in the number of special programs and specialized functions of schools with their particular

rules and regulations. Examples of such programs include education of handicapped, early childhood education and adult education. Other specialized activities in the schools include pupil accounting, free lunch programs and immunization. Such increasingly specialized functions may call for increased specialization of administrative staff at the district level or at the school level at a time when community support is non-existent for increasing the number of school administrators. Other than increasing the number of individuals, schools will need to increase the number of roles assumed by line administrators and increasingly clarify those roles.¹²

Changes in schools are influenced by factors both internal and external to the organization. The increased specialized functions of schools represent a slow but perceptible change brought about by societal pressures. This source of change is external to the school but its effect is direct and clear: i.e., schools must have bilingual education programs. This kind of change is different from those which may be initiated from within the educational community, albeit in response to external pressures. Such internally proposed changes include educational television, computer assisted instruction, non-grading and team teaching. These promising innovations have not taken hold in the elementary school and among the reasons given is that of a leadership vacuum; since administrators are selected from among teachers, they tend to reflect conservative values which are not supportive of change. Decision making is exercised which supports these values.¹³

Role of Decision Maker

The present and future administrative needs of the school may be satisfied in several ways. The school principal may be given increased responsibility for the new administrative mandates or the responsibilities may be assigned to another existing administrative position. It is suggested that the overburdened

principal be allowed to cope with extant problems while the assistant principal is given the legal responsibility to administer the new functions.

Such use of a legitimate and existing staff position would satisfy the administrative need for fixing responsibility as well as alleviating community pressure for fiscal conservation in creating additional administrative staff positions. The history of the roles of the assistant principal does not predict immediate acceptance and success; but change must begin somewhere.

The recommendation carries with it certain inherent difficulties. It proposes establishing a role for the assistant principal that goes beyond the more limited traditional roles of disciplinarian, supervision, curriculum development and public relations into areas previously reserved for the principal or assistant superintendent.

Success in the expanded role might more likely occur if built in to it is the legitimized function of decision making accompanied by the skills necessary to make decisions "work". It is particularly important that the assistant principal succeed in providing the leadership which will establish the new role as meaningful and successful. Enough is now known about leadership and decision making to provide guidelines, which, in and of themselves will not guarantee success, but point in the right direction.

Decision making by individuals is one administrative task which is being reduced by collective bargaining agreements, legal constraints and in the interpretation of the existence of sanctions.^{14, 15} Yet principals survive by taking advantage of those decision making opportunities that do exist. It may be that the most effective administrators over time are not those who "make" decisions but rather those who facilitate the decision making process by involving others.

It is assumed by many administrators that decision making has a most desirable influence on individuals when they participate in the decision making

process. They argue that school administration in a democracy implies consultation with, or involvement of, those concerned with the outcome of the decision. Some of these beliefs are supported by research while some beliefs must be modified as a result of other research.

A study supporting involvement was performed in 1948 in an industrial setting and showed quite clearly the effects of employee participation on productivity, efficiency, incidence of grievances, absenteeism and turnover. Among three groups, one given no opportunity for participation, another given participation through representation and a third group given total participation, a) turnover was great in the first group and non-existent in the others, b) production was low in the first and higher than the standard in the others.¹⁶ This result has been replicated by other students.^{17, 18} On the other hand, it has been suggested that involvement in decision-making over which participants have no control may be as counter-productive as no involvement at all.¹⁹

There is an assumption that participation in decision making is an all-or-none proposition. There are varying degrees of participation ranging from recommending a course of action to making the decision. It appears that the effects of participation will vary with the extent of involvement as well as with the desire of the individual to be involved and in the kinds and number of decisions.²⁰ Indeed, it may be assumed that not all individuals want to participate; some that do want less while some that don't want more. To the extent this is accurate, the administrator could affect teacher satisfaction and efficiency by an accurate determination as to the desired levels of involvement of staff in the varied issues and in the activities of a school.

Indications are that the effects of involvement in decision making are most clearly shown in teachers identified as "decisionally deprived". The larger the number of decisions in which teachers wish to participate but do not:

- a. the greater the perceived role conflict;
- b. the greater the probability that they are males;
- c. the greater the attitudinal militancy;
- d. the greater the probability of employment in a rural district;
- e. the higher the probability that the top administrative official will be perceived as relatively influential;
- f. the greater the probability of employment in secondary schools.²¹

Teachers who are decisionally saturated (more involvement than they want) tend to be older elementary school females teaching in an urban setting with moderate role conflicts and with little support for unions and strikes.

Decisional deprivation of teachers should be reduced if the probable consequences are to be avoided. Young male teachers in urban schools should be involved in decision making to the extent they would like to participate. The size of urban secondary schools may present difficulties because of the sheer number of teachers employed, but apparently every effort at maximizing involvement should be made.

Decisions may be made by individuals or by groups, by an administrator or by teachers. Under what conditions should teachers be involved? How should a decision making group be constituted? To what extent should teachers be involved? What role should an administrator play in shared decision making? The answers to these questions in each school setting provides direction to an administrator in developing and establishing his leadership style and his credibility.

It is known that in considering individuals as decision makers, attention must be given to characteristics of people since they may affect the rationality of the decision. It is suggested that most individual decisions are made for the present with the idea that they can be changed in the future. This making "satisficing" rather than "optimizing" decisions may be due to individual response to time pressure or to lack of information in some individuals. Other individuals appear to be programmed to make certain predictable decisions based

on their experience and their needs.²² It may be that the basic elements in thought processes of skilled and less skilled decision makers are similar - any differences may be based on the different ways basic elements are combined into tools for modifying goals, interpreting the environment and developing and evaluating alternative courses of action.²³

Any group decision making must consider schools as political entities of individuals and groups either working together or against each other. Cohesiveness will be affected by environmental influences such as arrangement of classrooms as well as by the origins and outside loyalties of groups; a struggle for power or control, such as pro-union or anti-union feelings. As groups interact in considering a decision, the outcome is likely to be affected by processes of communication, negotiation and influence. The established teacher "old guard" may resent an assistant principal inviting "new" teachers to recommend a procedure for grouping special education children. They may feel that their seniority should give them a first choice in making a decision.

Different decisions would seem to require varying patterns of decision making. Since decisions are made in relation to school goals, ways of meeting those goals may suggest patterns which answer the questions posed earlier relating to the who, what, when and how much involvement of teachers in decision making.

Four types of goals may be identified along with implications of each for participation in decision making.

1. Control goal. Insures that decisions get made. Provides someone to talk with to evaluate results or to get explanations of what happened.
2. Motivational goal. Provides a bridge between making and implementing decisions so that those involved identify with successful implementation.
3. Quality goal. Improve quality of the decision by involving those with most to contribute to the decision.

4. Training goal. Develop skills for handling problems in those who may move into administrative positions.
5. Efficiency goal. Get decisions made quickly with as little waste of manpower as possible.²⁵

The implications of research in decision making for administrators at all levels are considerable; their importance for the assistant principal is critical. The establishment of a new role is always difficult in any organization and is probably more difficult in schools where the traditional role has been vague if not somewhat limited in function. Creating a role which is complimentary to that of the principal and yet discrete in terms of particular responsibilities requires care. This paper is suggesting that knowledge of the direction of school programs, social direction and school population trends can serve as the basis of predicting goals of education while knowledge of teacher involvement in decision making can provide an understanding of administrative activities most likely to be associated with successful leadership.

Conclusion

The traditional role of assistant principal has changed very little over the past fifty years. What has changed is a decline in the number of positions which accompany reduced pupil enrollment. Societal expectations have resulted in increased demands that schools do more for fewer students, that they retain accountability to the public for the new functions and that they do these things with the same or reduced level of financial support.

As a result of these events the schools are faced with demands on administrators which are less responsive to traditional roles and administrative structures. The principalship has restrictions in action both real and perceived while the assistant principal has little authority beyond that of the traditional role.

It is suggested that the role of assistant principal be given legitimacy and authority to administer the many new functions of the schools of the 1980s. Along with the "new" role the assistant will need leadership skills with which to establish credibility and demonstrate effective leadership.

Decision making is identified as a crucial skill area and various aspects of decision making are described and an application to schools is suggested. Research studies indicate that participation of staff in the decision making process could have important effect on satisfaction and reduced militancy particularly on secondary school male teachers in urban areas. The most satisfactory level of participation appears to be related to what the teachers view as adequate, not necessarily related to what administrators perceive as appropriate. Decisionally deprived teachers are those who are most likely to resist decision making centered about a single administrator.

New studies of assistant principals at the national level are needed in order to determine current roles and responsibility trends, legitimate authority and decision making style. Identification of the current status of assistants will help to chart their future participation in the leadership and administration of schools.

Footnotes

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